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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HAVANA 000736

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [EAID](#) [SMIG](#) [CU](#)
SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS DAY TURNS VIOLENT IN HAVANA

REF: HAVANA 704 ("CUBA UNLEASHES MOB ON BLOGGERS")

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Classified By: Principal Office Jonathan Farrar for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. Human Rights Day turned violent in Havana as State-organized mobs attacked separate marches by the Damas de Blanco and by supporters of Dr. Darsi Ferrer. While the Damas were generally insulated from physical assault by state security agents surrounding them, Ferrer's supporters were picked off and attacked by a mob, and then shoved into waiting cars and driven away to undisclosed locations. A CNN reporter and a British diplomat were both subjected to harassment, shoving, and jostling, but emerged unharmed. Meanwhile, USINT's Human Rights Day reception for civil society featuring President Obama's Nobel Prize speech went off smoothly, with only scattered reports of harassment or detentions among those who planned to attend. END SUMMARY.

THE NIGHT BEFORE

12. (C) Two marches organized by the Damas de Blanco on December 9 and 10 were met by large, boisterous mobs clearly orchestrated by the Government of Cuba (GOC). The Damas, a group of women whose relatives are political prisoners, organized the first march on the evening of December 9. Departing from the house of group-leader Laura Pollan, 57 women marched without incident to the park where Darsi Ferrer traditionally holds a Human Rights Day march. The Damas distributed copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which USINT had provided to them) along the way. At the park, poloff observed a significant gathering of plainclothes state security forces. When Pollan began to speak to the international press, 4-5 pro-government protestors immediately ran toward her, shouting slogans and preventing further comments to the press. Poloff saw GOC-owned vehicles dropping off people who joined others gathering and completely enveloped the Damas, who were in turn surrounded by a cordon of plainclothes officers who prevented physical attacks. On the march back to Pollan's house, the mob swelled to 250-300 people. Poloff observed 25-30 additional mob participants leaving a bus with "Pastors

for Peace" painted on the side in English. When the Damas passed the University of Havana, a crowd of 50-60 students was waiting for them, with one student leading the mob in chants of "Down with Worms" and "Viva Fidel." When the Damas arrived back at the house, another group was waiting in the street to join in the mob as state security forced a passage for the Damas to Pollan's front door. The "Act of Repudiation" continued in front of the house for another hour and then dispersed. The Damas reported that at 11:00 PM a colonel from state security visited the house and told them to cancel anything they had planned for the next day.

HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

13. (C) The march on the morning of December 10 provided additional evidence of strong GOC organization. Approximately 25 Damas marched from the house to the former presidential palace in Old Havana. As the marchers approached the palace, poloff observed four mini-buses and two full-sized municipal buses, crammed with people, following behind. When the Damas tried to make a statement to the press from the steps of the palace, they were quickly forced away by the mob that had unloaded from the buses. While the Damas were again protected from violence by plainclothes state security, the crowd repeatedly attempted to reach them, shoving violently against the security detail and shouting slogans and obscenities. At the same time, however, poloff watched as the head of the security detail conferred multiple times with the two leaders of the mob, which quickly grew to 500-550 people.

STATE-ORGANIZED MOBS

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14. (C) At multiple points in the narrow streets, the mob leaders and state security appeared to coordinate the pace of the procession and the route. On one occasion, a city bus blocked the road and the mob shouted for the Damas to be loaded onto the bus and taken away, but the security detail would not allow it. One of the Damas was briefly separated from the group and blows rained upon her until she was able to return to the safety of the protected group. At one point, a double-decker bus filled with tourists approached on the main street. While the tourists filmed, the mob quickly linked arms and forced the entire procession to turn into a crowded side street and away from the eyes and cameras of the visitors. During the march, Poloffs asked shopkeepers and others on the street what was happening. Almost all knew who the Damas were and that they were "opposed to the GOC," but few could say why they were marching. Members of the mob also spoke to the onlookers, telling them that the Damas were "from away" and "mercenaries." The mobs on both days dwarfed the Damas, both in size and volume, and seemed intent on taking over the Damas protests and making them their own, pro-government, parades. Any efforts to film the Damas by international press were quickly blocked, as people flung themselves in front of the cameras and jostled the cameramen.

VIOLENCE IN THE PARK

15. (C) At the same time, a march in honor of Dr. Darsi Ferrer was held on the other side of town. Ferrer, who has been imprisoned without charge since July, has organized an annual, silent Human Rights Day since 2006. The march has always resulted in violence, and this year was no different. Poloff walked to the park where marchers had planned to gather and in less than two blocks saw almost forty plainclothes state security agents clustered along the street. The park, normally quiet at 10:00 a.m., had been festooned to masquerade as a neighborhood block party,

replete with stage, sound system, and stands selling clothing, popcorn, sweets, and sodas. One foreign reporter with decades of experience on the island told Poloff as he surveyed the festive scene, "This is the most Cuban Cuba you'll see. Nothing here is what it appears to be. It's all a facade." At approximately 11 a.m., a woman who had clearly been planted in the park received notice that the marchers had arrived and took off running towards them, yelling, "Run! Run! Hurry!" to the other "block party" participants. On cue, dozens of people in the park fell in line behind her, and dozens more began streaming out of the park and into the street where the marchers had appeared. The marchers never entered the park; instead, they were surrounded by a mob of approximately 100 people, which quickly grew to about 300. The mob picked off marchers individually, hitting, shoving, and spitting at them while screaming insults and pro-Castro chants. Poloff witnessed several marchers being physically assaulted by the mobs before plainclothes state security agents stepped in to grab the marchers from behind and drag them, usually by the neck, to waiting Ladas with non-government license plates. Each time a marcher was forced into a car and driven away, the mob would chant, "Fidel! Fidel! Fidel!" A final marcher (and USINT contact) was shoved into an ambulance. Although Poloff only saw security detain five marchers, our British counterpart told us he had seen Ferrer's wife, Yusnaimy Jorge Soca, being shoved into a car approximately one block from the park, and a civil society contact informed us that there were up to twenty marchers who had attempted to go to the park. The whereabouts of those who were detained are still unknown.

VIOLENCE AGAINST INTERNATIONAL PRESS AND A DIPLOMAT

16. (C) Violence was not only directed at Cuban marchers. After taking one or two questions from international

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television reporters covering the event, Poloff's British counterpart was mobbed by approximately 100 people who began screaming at him and appeared to be on the point of physically attacking him. Plainclothes state security agents immediately encircled him and blocked the mob from physically assaulting him as he attempted to walk the block and a half to his car. He and Poloff, who had previously agreed to depart the park together for safety reasons, had to navigate the mob in order to enter his car, and then drove through approximately thirty people who were surrounding the car, attempting to block its exit as they hit the car with their fists and shouted pro-GOC and anti-American phrases. An international reporter told our British counterpart that the events at the park were the most violent he had seen in twenty years on the island. Meanwhile, at the Damas de Blanco march, a CNN reporter was consistently harassed, pulled, and shoved by mob participants. Several times he had to stop filming and force his way out of an angry crowd. Poloffs and our counterparts from other embassies were tailed by state security agents throughout the Damas march.

USINT CELEBRATES HUMAN RIGHTS DAY AND THE NOBEL PRIZE

17. (C) The violence did not extend to USINT's open-invite reception for Cubans who registered to watch President Obama's Nobel Prize acceptance speech at the Chief of Mission's residence. Although USINT received reports of scattered detentions and of houses being surrounded, event participants experienced less state security harassment than normal, and 118 of the 200 people who had registered were able to attend. The event resulted in some negative GOC response, however. Some prominent opposition members who had registered for the event and who traditionally attend USINT functions did not attend, and may have been detained or blocked by state security. Attempts by USINT to contact them

throughout the day were unsuccessful. In addition, permission to use state-owned buses was revoked at the last minute, and all of the participants who were waiting for USINT-provided transportation were filmed and photographed at close range outside the Public Affairs Officer residence by three men claiming to be Cuban press.

18. (C) COMMENT: We were struck by how intricately each pro-GOC mob had been engineered, and by how insulated they appeared to be from ordinary Cubans on the street. From the outset, there was a clear distinction between mob participants, who had almost all been bused in for the event, and neighborhood bystanders, who generally appeared to be nonplussed. The GOC response seemed designed to send distinct messages to Cubans and to audiences abroad. The message to Cubans was clear: public opposition will not be tolerated. The message to the international community is also clear: "true" Cubans not only overwhelmingly support the revolution, but will also fight any who oppose it. Meanwhile, despite having organized counter-demonstrations behind the scenes, by publicly protecting targets from physical harm while the cameras are rolling, the GOC can continue claiming that it will protect dissidents from the anger of their compatriots.
END COMMENT.
FARRAR